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MEMOIR

OF

MAJOR SAMUEL RINGGOLD,

UNITED STATES ARMY:

READ BEFORE

The Maryland Historical Society,

APRIL 1st, 1847.

BY JAMES WYNNE, M. D.

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MEMOIR OF MAJ. SAMUEL RINGGOLD.

Mr. President and Gentlemen:

It becomes my melancholy, yet pleasing duty, this evening, to revive in your recollection a few of the striking characteristics and generous actions of one who, during life, devoted himself to the service of his country, and finally yielded up that life as a votive offering at her shrine.

In the performance of this duty, I am not actuated by an exalted opinion of military glory or renown; nor by a desire either to flatter or speak condolence to surviving relatives; these are worthy and creditable motives; but mine, on the present occasion, is a still higher one, and aims, by portraying a life full of usefulness and national devotion, so far as my feeble powers will permit, to inculcate the positive necessity for self sacrifice, when the government under which we live requires so much at the hands of either of its citizens.

In the examination of history we too frequently overlook the component parts of a nation. We behold it in its great achievements—in its display of power or weakness—in its advance or decline. The great actions which accomplish the one, or produce the other, stand before us in such bold relief that we lose sight of the less obtrusive, yet not less important agents, on which these great events actually depend. We look at nations in the aggregate, and not as a combination of individuals, like ourselves, and therefore fail to derive many of those salutary lessons which it is the province of history to impart.

Now it requires but a cursory examination into the philosophy of human society (and history is nothing more than a development of the effects of this philosophy on different nations), in order to ascertain that each individual has duties to perform towards society, represented in its government, as high, as imperious, and as binding as those due to himself and his family, and he who is recreant to the former, fails in one of the first and most essential elements of citizenship, no matter how well he may execute the latter. To no form of human association is this position more applicable than to that in which we live, composed, as it avowedly is, of members united together for the purposes of individual protection and advantage, on terms of the most perfect equality, and admitting of the greatest amount of personal liberty compatible with well regulated society. Whenever these obligations, due from the citizen to his government, are cheerfully complied with, and properly performed, they furnish unmistakeable evidence of national prosperity. Whenever these are wanting, and the authority of government is not responded to by those over whom it exercises, or should exercise, an authority, it is doomed to certain and irretrievable decline. History is full of examples in proof of this position, and in the long catalogue of national calamities which it details, it tells of the destruction of no nation in which this element did not contribute a large share to its downfall. Nations have nothing to fear from a formidable exhibition of power from without, but from apathy and dissension within. These are the great sources of national weakness, and therefore those which should be most sedulously guarded against. So thought the ancients when the most gifted and influential among them considered it an honor to die to preserve the

unity of their own government. So thought Nicias—so thought the greatest of Grecian orators, Demosthenes—so, too, thought the wisest of ancient philosophers, Socrates, each of whom was devoted a willing sacrifice at his country's altar. They have died, but their deeds have survived the wreck of time, and are as fresh and potent for good, in the remembrance of those who now live, as when the knowledge of these sacrifices was first proclaimed to their countrymen at Athens. And who can tell how much of the prosperity of Greece, through so many ages, depended on the example of the devotion of these and other illustrious men to their country. Nor was the sunny clime and age of *living* Greece the only one which inspired its inhabitants with this enthusiastic devotion to country. Each nation, whether situated amid the frosts of eternal winter, or parched beneath the ardor of an equatorial sun, cherishes in a guarded spot, within the entablature of its history, the memory of some among her children who, on the tented field, amid the raging pestilence, the desolating famine, or some other national calamity, have parted with life under circumstances calculated to call forth the grateful admiration of those who survived them.

Our own country, in the few short years which have transpired since it first merged from a weak and feeble infancy into a great and prosperous nation, has numbered among its citizens many to whom it points with a proud exultation, and whose memories are preserved as patterns of excellence, worthy of admiration and imitation by their descendants.

In this city, styled, "par excellence," the monumental city, because of the works it has raised to perpetuate the memory of those who deserve to be held in remembrance, one of the first objects that strikes

the eye of the stranger, as he approaches it, rearing its white shaft high toward heaven, and towering in majestic grandeur over every surrounding object, is the noble monument erected to the memory of the father of his country, at the same moment an evidence to all future generations of your patriotism and his exalted character. Passing from antecedent to more modern times in our history, the classic battle monument presents itself, on which are inscribed the names of those who fell in defence of this fair and goodly city, which you claim as your *particular heritage.* Nor can I pass by, in silence, the rustic lodge of old gray stone, where, amid the lull of the waterfall, and the gentle sighing of the graceful elms which overhang and shelter it, the monument of ARMISTEAD, surrounded by appropriate emblems, demands from the passer-by a moment's consideration. When I thus behold myself surrounded by so many instances of the reward of individual merit, need I fear to ask you to enter with me into the field of PALO ALTO—to single out one of those stern warriors who, amid the carnage of battle, was busy in that fearful struggle of life and death—need I fear to ask you to fix your eyes on one who was known by reputation to all, and personally to most of the members of this society—who was a native of Maryland, and a citizen of Baltimore—Major SAMUEL RINGGOLD.

Major Ringgold was the eldest son of Gen. Samuel Ringgold, of Washington county, in this state. The family, both on his father's and mother's side, (which latter was a daughter of Gen. Cadwalader, of Philadelphia,) was highly respectable, and exercised a considerable influence in the section of country in which they resided, where his father filled many offices of trust and honor, the most distinguished of which was a seat in the house of representatives of the U. States.

Major Ringgold was born in the year 1800, and, in 1814, then in his fourteenth year, entered, as a cadet, the West Point Academy. Here he commenced in earnest that course of study which was destined to fit him for the useful life he was afterwards to lead; and here too his mind was left free to enjoy the full scope of those hopes and aspirations which had been the subject of his day dreams in his earlier years. He was by nature a soldier; all his early impressions were associated with this mode of life, and all his hopes were to render himself worthy to discharge well the duties of such a station. His ancestors had performed no mean part in the war of the revolution, and his maternal grandfather not only occupied an important post in that army, but was likewise the warm friend, and confidant of General Washington.

The scenes of that eventful period were yet too fresh in the memory, not to become an almost constant topic of conversation; and if he was not literally nursed amid the clang of armor, the time of his birth was yet so nearly allied to that of the revolution, that the excitement produced by it had then scarcely subsided into the sober routine of ordinary life. It still occupied men's thoughts, and gave a coloring to their actions; it still found its way into the nursery, and furnished the fruitful theme by which the American mother was accustomed to beguile the hours of her wondering child. Under ordinary circumstances, periods of excitement are followed with results somewhat akin to this; but when we consider that the revolution not only gave a direction to the thoughts, but likewise wrought a total change in the whole constitution of society; that it established a form of government, entirely different from that which had preceded it, and exhibited to mankind a practical demonstration of the ability of man to govern himself;

that it led every member of the community to view, with an intensity of interest, the gradual and certain development of that problem, on which his future hopes depended, and around which his warmest affections were clustered, it is not singular that one whose nearest relatives were associated with the administration of public affairs, should have imbibed in a high degree the spirit of the age, and gazed, with all the romantic imagination of youth, on that period so important in the destiny of his country.

Nor was there any thing in the times, when he entered the military academy, calculated to dampen this ardor of his spirit. Our old enemy, Great Britain, had retired from the contest defeated, it is true, yet far from being satisfied with the loss of her rich colonial possessions, and a series of aggressions, of a number of years' continuance, which finally broke out into an open rupture, and was then progressing, kept alive all those feelings of jealousy and distrust, calculated to inflame a youthful mind, and cause it to pant for military renown.

While too many others, therefore, were wasting the precious moments of youth, in idle or frivolous pastimes, he was engaged in the diligent pursuit of his studies, and aimed not merely to know, but to know well every branch of knowledge necessary to accomplish him as an officer. Industry like this seldom goes unrewarded, and after four years of diligent study, he had the gratification to receive the highest honors of the institution, and graduated at the head of his class.

At his entrance into the army he received the appointment of aid to General Scott, and repaired to Philadelphia, at which place that officer held his head quarters. After three years service in this capacity, he was detailed as an engineer under Major Bache, to make an examination of a part of our

southern coast, which service he left to join the third regiment, as a lieutenant. In all these varied capacities he was never unmindful of his duties, and endeavored, by much observation and study, and an ardent application to the business confided to his charge, to extend the sphere of his military usefulness.

At a later period he performed the duties of ordnance officer to the army at the important post of New York. He brought to the discharge of this duty not only great skill as an officer, but a superior inventive genius. Among other evidences of the exhibition of this talent, for the profit and advantage of his country, his improvement on the percussion cannon lock stands pre-eminent. The lock at that time in use, not only in our own country, but elsewhere, was peculiarly liable to injury from the unyielding manner in which the hammer fell upon the cap, at the breech of the gun. The recoil shock was so great as frequently to throw the hammer from its position, and thus disable the piece from active service for the time. This defect proved of such importance in actual service, as in no small degree to do away with the advantages of the percussion lock over the old mode of firing the gun.

Major Ringgold not only perceived, in common with others, this defect, but likewise discovered its remedy, and, after much time and labor expended in the pursuit, succeeded in imparting a lateral motion to the hammer, by means of a spring, which drew it sideways and backward the moment after it gave the blow by which the cap was exploded. This invention, at that time adopted in the service, furnished the basis on which all the more modern improvements have been made.*

* Some appreciation of the value of this discovery may be formed from the circumstance, that the last session of congress awarded Mr. Joseph Shaw, a distinguished landscape painter, twenty thousand dollars for an improvement on

The military saddle, now in general use in the army for dragoons and artillery, is likewise an invention of his, and is said to possess many advantages over the one formerly in use.

When the unfortunate disagreement between the general government and the state of South Carolina assumed so foreboding an aspect in 1831, he was ordered to Charleston, where he remained until the cessation of the difficulties in 1833. The position occupied by the army here was truly an unpleasant one, and attended with perplexities which none but a participant can well imagine. Bound to the performance of orders by a rigid military discipline, they could not forget that they were placed in a hostile attitude towards their own countrymen, who, however deluded they might be, were still sincere in their delusion. Kindness and urbanity were therefore united to a strict observance of discipline, and due compensation was made for the irritated feelings of their opponents. During those troublous times Major, then Lieut. Ringgold, was enabled to pursue such a course as to assist very materially in removing the torch, which seemed ready, in the hand of the incendiary, to light the whole Union into a blaze.

It is no mean praise to the entire corps of army and navy officers, engaged on this truly perilous service, to say, that there was among them but one expression of opinion and mode of action, and that was to quiet

the cannon lock, which flowed, as a consequence, from Major Ringgold's discovery. In this he may truly be said to have acted as a pioneer, but, as too frequently occurs, whilst he shook the tree others collected the fruit. I have no disposition to detract from the value of Mr. Shaw's really meritorious invention, who is not the less entitled to praise, *and reward too*, because a portion of the difficulty was removed from his pathway, but only desire to render the subject of this memoir that meed of praise to which his discovery so justly entitles him, but which has been so long withheld.

The original lock on which Major Ringgold made his experiments, and which was subject to one or two thousand trials, was presented by his brother, Lieut. Cadwalader Ringgold, of the U. S. Navy, to Sir Howard Douglas, a distinguished officer of the British army, and the author of a valuable work on naval gunnery.

and assuage—to treat all with unwonted courtesy and urbanity, and to repay unkind words and hasty expressions with kind and studied politeness. How admirably fitted, by nature and education, the subject of this memoir was, to pursue such a line of conduct with success, you can all bear testimony. These services were so highly appreciated by the general government as to procure for him the rank of captain by brevet, at a later period, when ample time was had to review his conduct, to commence from May, 1832.

In 1836 he received the commission of captain, and was ordered to the command of a company in the third artillery at Savannah, from which post he was shortly after removed, to take part in the Seminole war, then raging in Florida. During the greater part of this vexatious and unprofitable war he remained in Florida, subject, in common with the rest of the army, to a series of privations and physical evils, which lost to the country many a brave and promising officer, in the full glow and vigor of youth, and shattered for life the constitutions of many who survived; among this latter class was Major, then Captain Ringgold. With him and too many others the immense morasses and ever-glades, which stretch along this whole peninsula, united to the ardor of a southern sun, and sending forth, with every breeze, the most pestilential and deadly vapors, proved a much more formidable opponent than the treacherous Indian concealed beneath the luxuriance of their foliage: and when, in the fall of 1838, his company was disbanded, and he received orders to repair to Carlisle, Pa. for the purpose of entering upon a new and untried species of duty, he returned to his friends emaciated in body, haggard in countenance, and but a wreck of his former self.

The pure and invigorating air of the healthy region in which Carlisle is situated served, in some degree,

to repair the injuries he had sustained, and restored him to passable health; but the elasticity of his form was gone, the vigor of his youthful constitution had vanished, and he was destined, during the remainder of his life, to suffer from the consequences of the disease contracted in his Florida campaign. Here too, as in every other position occupied by him, he performed eminent services, and received, in consideration of them, the rank of major by brevet.

But whilst his body was thus debilitated by disease, his mind retained its wonted energy, and he sat himself to the task of organizing a new branch of service, with all the zeal and alacrity which had characterized his more youthful exertions.

Without attempting any disparagement to the other officers of the army, I but repeat what they have frequently declared, when I say, that the government exhibited a just discrimination of character in selecting Major Ringgold as one of its chief agents in organizing a corps of flying artillery, new to our service, but which had been found so formidable in the prosecution of the wars on the continent of Europe.

From this period until the day of his death, his mind was constantly occupied with the desire to give greatest efficiency to the service under his command. His fine and manly corps, admirably accoutred and appointed, constituted his idol; he doated upon it, as a parent upon his first born, and succeeded in inspiring the same enthusiasm in the breast of every individual under his command.

During much of the time he was engaged in developing this system of military tactics, he was a resident of Baltimore, his corps being stationed at Fort McHenry, which place he left, but a few months previous to his death, to join the army under the command of General Taylor, on our south-western frontier.

During his residence here we had all frequent opportunities of witnessing those wonderful military manœuvres executed by his company, in which both man and horse seemed to vie with each other best to execute his part.

The writer first met with Major Ringgold at Washington, when ordered there during the last year of Mr. Van Buren's administration, to exhibit the feats of his company before the president and his cabinet, and so quick and sudden were their movements, so rapid and constant the discharge of their cannon, so soon in harness again, and ready for change of position or flight, that it seemed almost the work of magic art, and all present pronounced it the very excellence of military manœuvring.

But it required sterner times fully to develop its efficiency, and these times, unfortunately, came too soon. The battle of Palo Alto, the first blow struck in the warfare with our Mexican neighbor, which God grant may be of short duration, while it lost to the country its able commander, fully realized the anticipations entertained for the corps of flying artillery, and the heaps of promiscuous dead that lay piled together wherever its formidable cannons pointed their mouths, gave terrible proof of its efficiency in actual warfare.

This battle field, at the same moment the witness of his triumph and of his death, furnishes the closing scene of his life. "Upon reaching the field of Palo Alto," says Powell, "at about three o'clock in the afternoon of the 8th of May, the action commenced by the Mexicans opening their batteries on their right, at a distance of half a mile from our line. The fire was responded to by two eighteen pounders, in charge of Lieut. Churchill; Major Ringgold now took position to the right and front of the eighteen pounders, at a distance of seven hundred yards from

the enemy, subsequently, advancing one hundred yards, and opened his battery with tremendous effect, as was shown the next day by the large number of the enemy's dead found on the field along this line."

"Major Ringgold pointed the guns with his own hand, and, with unerring precision, directing the shot not only to groups and masses of the enemy, but to particular men in their lines. He saw them fall in numbers, their places occupied by others who, in their turn, were shot down. Pointing his guns to the same place, and, to use his own words, 'he felt as confident of hitting his mark as though he had been using a rifle.' The infantry was formed in his rear as his support, and cheered rapturously the brilliant movements and destructive execution of his battery, while they received the enemy's fire with great coolness at a shoulder, impatient only for the order to charge."

"At length a regiment of the enemy's lancers were seen to make a demonstration towards our right, apparently to gain possession of our wagon train, when Lieut. Ridgely was detached with two pieces to check the movement. This left Maj. Ringgold short of men, or rather with a less number than he desired, and considered actually necessary, to execute his movement with celerity, and to supply the places of those who fell, or became disabled. This was a source of regret to him, even in his last moments; but he gallantly and nobly did his duty. Not a shade of incapacity, want of diligence, lack of bravery on the battle field, can rest on his memory or the sunshine of his military character."*

* Powell's Life of Taylor, pp. 52-3.

"In the action of Palo Alto," says a friend of his, who was present, in a letter to me, descriptive of the battle, "the post of honor was assigned to the lamented Ringgold; on the right, where for hours the attention of the whole right wing was riveted on his battery, the most brilliant success attended every manœuvre, and although his services were of short duration, yet long enough to earn for him the highest honors of the day."

For three hours longer he continued, with his two remaining pieces, to do great execution, until shot through the thighs by a cannon ball, passing from right to left, carrying with it a large mass of muscle and integuments, and tearing off the front of the saddle, and withers of the noble charger on which he rode. He fell slowly from his horse, and had scarcely reached the ground, when one of his lieutenants (Shover) came to his assistance, and while he supported him, called for a caisson to carry him to the rear. "*Never mind, sir*," said Ringgold, "*go ahead with your men; all are wanted in front.*" When, however, finally prevailed upon to be carried from the field, he remarked, with great coolness, to his lieutenant: "*Be careful to get an empty caisson, as you may require all your ammunition.*"

The conduct of his artillery now devolved upon Lieut. Randolph Ridgely, his second in command, who, although inferior in point of cool calculation and consummate caution, was his equal in bravery and daring adventure. It will doubtless be the task of another, and more able pen than mine, to do justice to the memory of this young and meritorious officer. The moment had now arrived when the army was to move forward, and leave the wounded to be carried back to Point Isabelle. Even here the ardor of the soldier did not forsake him. It had been his polar star through life; it continued to exercise its influence over him in his last moments. "*Tell Randolph*," said he to a friend who, on the eve of starting, tarried for a moment to bid him, what they both knew would be, a final farewell, "*to look well to his pieces, and see that his harness is complete. The smallest defect may destroy the efficiency of a piece.*" On the same day he was carried to Point Isabelle, where, notwithstanding the best application of surgical skill the army could

furnish, he died on the following morning (May 10th, 1846,) at one o'clock, conversing, up to the last moment of his life, with great cheerfulness, upon the movements of the army.

In person Major Ringgold was tall and commanding, and of late years quite spare; his countenance open, frank and pleasing, gave evidence of the generous traits which found repose in his breast. His manners were easy and polite; he was courteous and affable to all, and his heart was full of human sympathy. While he exacted from every individual under his command the strictest observance of duty, he was respected and beloved by them all, and may truly be said to have lived and died without enemies.

He was buried with military honors on the 11th of May, but it was destined that his resting place should not be in that distant spot, and a deputation was sent for the purpose of bringing his remains to his native state. A few months have scarcely elapsed since this deputation returned with their charge; and were other evidence wanting to establish the fame of the lamented dead, it could be found in the generous outpouring of spirit which drew thousands of his fellow citizens, of both sexes, and all ages, to gaze on the coffin which enclosed his mortal remains, or in the impulse which produced, on the day of his final interment, a general suspension of business; or the splendid military cavalcade, collected from all parts of the state, which accompanied his remains to that resting place where his ashes will again commingle with the soil of the state which gave him birth.

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